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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of national and state efforts to address school-performance scores as a means of monitoring local school productivity for the 21st century. School-accountability report cards were introduced in the early 1990s to provide parents and others with interesting and useful information about schools. However, many of these report cards appeared to provide little comparative information about one school's achievement over another. As a result of this deficiency, the late 1990s brought a refinement in the report-card process. State legislatures and departments of public education began to design and mandate additional qualifying instruments to measure and compare the effectiveness of local schools. Thus, local school performance scores (SPS) have been instituted in many states as a process to compare the progress of schools toward predetermined benchmarks of effectiveness over time. A number of states have also attached rewards or sanctions to the progress of local schools toward their growth goals. Some states even rank and compare each school's SPS to those of others within the state. (Contains 10 references.) (DFR)

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Determining Local School Effectiveness through State Accountability Directives: A National and State Perspective

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Determining Local School Effectiveness through State Accountability Directives: A National and State Perspective

Research Abstract

School accountability report cards were introduced by many states in the early 1990s as a way to provide parents and other concerned parties with interesting and useful information about their local schools. At the same time, though, many of these report cards appeared to provide little comparative information enabling evaluation of the relative achievement of one school over another within a state. In addition, many school report cards appeared to miss a valuable opportunity to engage parents, the local business community, and other stakeholders in a school's success by noting specific inadequacies and setting forth specific challenges. As a result of this deficiency, the late 1990s brought a refinement in the report card process. The need to know more information about productivity of individual schools by State Departments of Public Education coupled with the public's desire to know which schools in their communities seemed to be more successful in fulfilling their missions was the impetus for this change. State Legislatures and Departments of Public Education began to design and mandate additional qualifying instruments to measure and compare the effectiveness of local schools. Thus, local School Performance Scores (SPS) have been instituted in many states as a process to compare the progress of schools toward predetermined benchmarks of effectiveness over a period of time. A number of states have also attached rewards or sanctions to the progress of local schools toward their growth goals. Some states even rank and compare one school's SPS to others within the State. This research paper provides an overview of national and state efforts to address school performance scores as a means of monitoring local school productivity for the coming century.

Determining Local School Effectiveness through State Accountability Directives: A National and State Perspective

Background Information About School Accountability

Over the past decade, efforts to strengthen public education have been unfolding throughout the United States. Because of the belief that quality education is fundamental to the economic well being of the state and the democratic foundation of society, a number of reform initiatives designed to create and encourage more productive schools have been implemented. A popular process presently being implemented in a number of states is the development of a local school effectiveness score (or even ranking) that may be used to compare each public school against a rubric of components intended to describe elements of school productivity. In most cases the process is mandated by either the State Legislature to ensure accountability for public school financing or by the state's Department of Public Education to link accomplishments with legislative requests for additional or existing funding. Whatever the origin, the process is usually complex and controversial since each state has adopted its own perspective of methodology for determining accountability (Davie & Silva, 1999).

Two essential terms are used by almost every state involved in efforts to increase the productivity of public education systems: assessment and accountability. Generally, assessment means how performance is measured, and all states have a variety of data-gathering methods for this process. Accountability refers to the decisions that are made and the actions that are taken as a result of the performance shown by assessment. Therefore, states have adopted student and school assessment systems as well as student

accountability and school accountability systems. These two systems will guide the efforts of public education leaders as they attempt to monitor and improve the productivity of the local school. This investigation focuses on national and state efforts to document school accountability.

Impetus for this Investigation

As states concentrate on the academic performance of individual schools, report cards are one of the most popular tools for communicating information to parents, other taxpayers, and educators (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1997). Nationally, school report cards are considered a central feature of state accountability systems and are used in 36 states. Further, nineteen states use report card scores to rank or compare accomplishments of local schools (Jerald & Boser, 1999). The assumption is that these report cards will improve public education indirectly by providing stakeholders and the general public with better information--spurring low-performing schools into the action of improvement and inspiring parents to become more involved in encouraging and even demanding more school effectiveness. Report cards also serve a marketing function, helping parents choose schools and assuring taxpayers that their money is well spent (Olson, 1999).

The Report Card Dilemma

Across the 50 states, school report cards vary tremendously. No two states report exactly the same information on their report cards nor do any two report cards appear similar in appearance. Some reports are just several pages of statistics, with no explanatory text (ERIC, 1999). Others run into a dozen pages, with sample test questions and detailed descriptions of what constitutes exemplary performance. In spite of the tens of thousands of dollars states spend on report cards, it is often hard to identify the primary

audience or the purpose the reports were designed to serve. According to researchers, little time is usually spent on the report card's content, format, or usefulness (The American School Board Journal, 1999a).

Recently, the Pew Charitable Trusts funded an investigation to examine report cards of all the 50 states and enhanced the study by conducting community focus groups across the country. The results of the investigation suggest that local school report cards were not living up to potential either as a way to communicate with the public or as an accountability tool. Both parents and taxpayers believe they can improve education with the right information, but they do not think they are getting it now. In addition, educators and the taxpaying public tend to have different priorities for the kinds of information they want about schools and how this information should be used (Davie & Silva, 1999). Taxpayers and, to some lesser degree, parents of enrolled students are more results-oriented and more likely to support real rewards and consequences for school performance. Educators want more information about the context in which a school operates, including funding. They generally resist attaching high-stakes decisions to the outcomes of schools.

In addition, there is concern about the number of members of the public and education circles who actually receive any school report cards, since a third or more of the focus group members had never seen a local school report card. Only 13 states require school report cards to be sent home to parents, and about half the states have web site access to school scores (California Department of Public Education, 1999). The Pew investigation found that parents wanted more information than did other groups. In response to open-ended questions, parents wanted information about the quality of life in

the school, school leadership, different program offerings, and some information about parent and student satisfaction rates.

Determining School Accountability Indicators

In September 1998, Belden, Russonello, and Steward, a Washington-based research and communications firm, met with focus groups across the nation to determine the indicators desired in local school report cards. Three groups were represented in the tally: (a) parents of public school children, (b) taxpayers who do not have children in public schools, and (c) educators. The top five indicators selected by all groups included (a) school safety, (b) qualifications of teachers, (c) class size, (d) graduation rates, and (e) student dropout rates. Attendance rates, student scores on state and national tests and funding ranked lower in order of priority. Lowest priority was placed on the number of students per computer, percent of parents who attend conferences, and demographic characteristics of students (The American School Board Journal, 1999b).

Area of Research for this Investigation

National summary information about the above efforts to address school accountability in all states was missing. Answers to the following questions were not easily available: How do state policy makers determine levels of acceptable effectiveness for local schools? Are similar processes used by more than one state? What are the labels used to describe the accomplishments of schools as the continuum of acceptability moves from "not acceptable" to "average" to "outstanding"? Are rewards or sanctions provided in accountability processes and if so, what are they? Do states also require the same accountability efforts by private or parochial schools as they do for the public schools? This investigation provides a background and summary information addressing these questions from a national and state (Louisiana) level.

The Present Investigation

Method of Research for this Investigation

Mindful of the above information, the researchers decided to gather data addressing accountability efforts from each state's Department of Public Education. Responses were gathered to the following requests for information: (a) state reform efforts of public education dealing with accountability, (b) methods used to assess effectiveness of local schools, (c) rewards or sanctions used by the state to promote school effectiveness, and (d) information about accountability measures affecting private or parochial schools.

Findings of the Investigation

Information was received from all 50 State Departments of Public Education and is summarized for reporting below. The primary purpose of the school accountability system as reported by school officials in all states is to ensure that each child in the state has the opportunity to receive an adequate education. State leaders also reported that the accountability plan holds schools and districts accountable for the performance of students and makes them more responsible for helping students achieve high standards of learning. Further, it was reported that local schools are required to make improvements until their students meet the standards set as goals of the accountability system of the state.

Schools whose students meet established standards and schools that improve productivity over a set period of time will be recognized. The process of recognition varies greatly between states. Schools that do not make sufficient improvement will first receive assistance from the local district and state. Most states provide extra funding for this process. More severe sanctions are possible if a school fails persistently to meet its

goals after assistance is provided. Few states have actually enforced any severe sanctions on schools not achieving the prescribed mark. Private and parochial schools are exempt from mandatory participation in accountability practices in all states.

Determining the School Performance Score

An analysis of the indicators of the report cards from the 36 states that presently produce them for all local schools shows that some items such as student attendance, graduation rate, and dropout rates are common to all reports. In addition, student standardized scores on national tests and class size are also included. A few states include follow-up information about post-secondary study, satisfaction inventories of graduates, and socio-economic information. No two states provide the same information in the same format. Nineteen states actually rank schools as to effectiveness as part of their accountability system. Three states use test scores alone for the evaluation ranking and another three conduct site visits as part of the school ranking process. Most of the 19 states compare school scores against some predetermined benchmark score, and three states factor in demographic information to determine school scores.

There is no consistency among the 19 report card producing states in the labels used to rank local schools with one another. Labels for the top ranked schools include such categories as: demonstrated exemplary, accredited, academically distinguished, summary accredited, and clear. Likewise, no consistency exists for schools ranked as low performers. Distinctions such as: in need of improvement, denied accredited, unaccredited, alert 3, unacceptable and academically unacceptable are common.

All states reported that some type of remediation would be required for schools scoring "low" on effectiveness. The remediation plan will be monitored through the Department of Public Education in each state; however, most efforts will be centered with

the local school district taking immediate charge and supervision of activities. Most states were not interested in ranking schools from top to bottom or against each other. Thirty-one percent of the states reporting stated that they had not developed a ranking process for public schools but were interested only in providing a profile of the school's progress toward benchmarks. Only Missouri reported this as a mandated procedure for its accountability process.

The Ranking Process

Most states report that the overall effectiveness score of a local school would be a label reflecting a range of numerical values. For example, a school score between the indices 30.0 and 60.0 might receive the label "satisfactory" or "needs improvement," or a school score of 58% might be translated to a label of "academic enhanced." Of the nineteen states developing a ranking process, no two states utilize the same label for its schools and no two states use the same indicators to derive the local school score.

The initial school performance numerical value in each state is determined by a variety of mechanisms that use basically the same data but weight the data differently. About half the states using school report cards have selected to determine school performance scores using the same data for all schools regardless of K-12 status. Those using a different formula for School Performance Scores (SPS) generally factor dropout rate into the schools having middle and high school grades.

Incentives or Sanctions

A number of rewards (or incentives) are available for schools showing high SPS with some states reporting the reward process still pending in either the State Legislature or Department of Public Education. The most common awards or bonuses to local schools include: (a) public recognition, such as newspaper and television coverage, (b)

certificates of achievement by the school board and/or State Department of Public Education, and (c) plaques to be placed in the local schools. Fourteen states promise increased funding for schools raising their SPS more than the state's determined growth rate–funds amounting to a set lump sum of $1000 or an allotment per student enrollment amounting to several thousand dollars. Some states even reported the possibility of salary bonuses for teachers serving in highly productive schools; however, these ideas have not made it through the legislature as yet. Local schools may use reward funds for any purchases the school feels important so long as state purchasing rules are followed. Most schools have plans to spend the funds on instructional materials and supplies to enhance their curriculum. It is safe to say that the procedure to distribute rewards to local schools for success in state rankings is still under construction and at times seems to carry a political connotation.

On the other hand, schools not earning an SPS above predetermined ranks or those schools not showing significant SPS improvement over a period of time will look forward to sanctions or penalties that range from additional mandated teacher professional development activities to reconstitution or even disbandment of the school. All states are moving cautiously in this area since any school closure due to low SPS would be dependent on a number of variables (California Department of Public Education, 1999). It appears that Departments of Public Education are waiting to gauge the first two to three years of SPS values to determine if the indicators selected are the appropriate ones for all schools in the state and to see if the proper weight is allowed for each indicator in determining the SPS. At present, 11 states provide for the closure of unsuccessful schools that do not improve in effectiveness or performance following

prescribed assistance. Ten states incorporate plans to take over consistently low performing schools.

Special local school assistance in the form of funding from the local school district and the assignment of one or more lead educators to assist current school leaders is provided to assist schools having low SPS to meet their growth targets. Many state statutes call for the issuance of vouchers to parents whose children are enrolled in a low performing school. The vouchers could be used to enroll children in a better performing school; thereby, effectively disbanding the original non-productive school. Some states simply refuse to fund low scoring schools on a consistent basis. It appears that the emphasis for corrective action is more centered on the local school district than on the State Department of Public Education. Again, most states have not yet entered this phase of the accountability process, since most state accountability plans require a number of years to determine a school growth pattern and then an additional number of years for the school to reach a predetermined target for success. Data presently being collected will describe the number of schools scoring so low that they will be deemed as ineffective in providing a quality education for the student population served.

Thirteen states require local districts to assist low performing schools with funds, professional development efforts, or other on-site assistance. Eight states require the local districts to prepare improvement plans for low performing schools. Further, four states impose sanctions such as withholding funds or allowing students to transfer from long-term low-performing schools to better performing schools.

States with strong accountability programs are generally split with the impetus for the development of the accountability process coming from the State Legislature and the state's Department of Public Education. There appears to be no geographical area that

features one originating process of accountability over the other. Finally, size of the state or operational budget is not a factor either.

Louisiana's Comprehensive Assessment Plan: Reaching for Results

Louisiana's School and District Accountability System is similar to that developed by other states in the Nation. Challenging standards, assessments, and improvement strategies are included in a comprehensive plan for improving schools and student achievement. In 1997, the State Legislature passed, and the governor signed into law, legislation that mandated many significant changes in public education for grades pre-kindergarten through twelve. The legislation established a statewide accountability program that would help schools and communities focus on student achievement, and as a result, create fundamental changes in classroom teaching. Because the accountability system encourages and supports continuous school improvement and growth, each school's progress is determined by comparing its current performance to its own baseline data, understanding that every school, however developed it may be, can improve. The accountability system establishes clear and appropriate standards; identifies indicators to be used in assessing schools and school districts; defines student achievement baselines, growth targets, and minimum levels of student achievement for every public school and school district; sets forth a plan of rewards and corrective actions; creates a review process for evaluating growth targets; and offers technical assistance to educational practitioners and institutions.

Reaching for Results is Louisiana's comprehensive plan to improve both student and school achievement that was developed in response to the 1997 legislation. Never

before has such a wide-ranging, integrated program focused on improving education been developed in Louisiana with the support of the Governor, the Legislature, the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the State Department of Education, educators, and the public.

Testing has always been a major component of public school education in Louisiana; however, Louisiana's School and District Accountability System compiles and reports the data in order for it to be more easily understood by students, parents, educators, and the general public. As a part of the accountability system, every Louisiana public school student in grades three through eleven participates in either the state's criterion-referenced tests (Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century, e.g., LEAP 21) or the norm-referenced tests (the Iowa Tests of Educational Development or the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills).

Each public school in the state receives a School Performance Score (SPS) determined by using a weighted composite index derived from select indicators. For schools having grades K-6, the SPS will be derived from the criterion-referenced test (60%), the norm-referenced test (30%), and student attendance (10%). The SPS for schools having grades 7-8 will be determined using the same percentages, except that the 10% allocated to student attendance will be divided into a 5% weight for student attendance and 5% weight for the dropout rate. The determination of the SPS for schools with grades 9-12 is currently under development. The indicators being considered for adoption are criterion-referenced tests, norm-referenced tests, student attendance, a dropout index, and a graduation index.

Additionally, the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education has established ten- and twenty-year goals for anticipated school growth. Each public school will be provided its Growth Target, which represents the progress the school must make every two years to reach the state's goals.

Schools will be assigned two distinct labels: Louisiana School Performance Label and Louisiana School Growth Label. School Performance Scores will be used to determine Performance Labels for each public school in the state. Growth labels will be determined by measuring how the school improved over its previous performance in relation to its Growth Target. The following charts represent adopted labels for Louisiana's Public School Accountability Program (LA Department of Education, 1999a):

Louisiana School Performance Labels

School of Academic Excellence	Score of 150 or more
School of Academic Distinction	Score of 125 - 149.9
School of Academic Achievement	Score of 100 - 124.9
Academically Above State Average	Score at the State Average - 99.9
Academically Below State Average	Score of 30.1 up to the State Average
Academically Unacceptable	Score of 30.0 or lower

Louisiana School Growth Labels

Exemplary Academic Growth	School that exceeds its growth target by five points or more
Recognized Academic Growth	School that exceeds its growth target by less that five points
Minimal Academic Growth	School whose SPS is higher than its baseline but less than the growth target
School in Decline	School whose SPS is less than or equal to its baseline

A system of rewards and recognition will be established for those schools meeting or surpassing their Growth Targets. Schools either not meeting their Growth Targets or identified as Academically Unacceptable will be required to enter Corrective Actions. Three levels of Corrective Actions have been created. Level I includes the assignment to the school of a district assistance team whose members have been trained in strategic school improvement. In Level II, a distinguished educator employed and trained by the State Department of Education is assigned to the school to work closely with school and district personnel as well as the community. Parents may transfer their students from Academically Unacceptable schools. Possible consequences of the most extreme Level III of Corrective Actions include possible student transfers, loss of state approval and reconstitution.

Conclusions/Implications of the Study

This investigation focused on five major questions: (1) How do states determine levels of acceptable effectiveness for local schools? (2) Are similar processes used by more than one state? (3) What are the labels used to describe the accomplishments of schools as the continuum of performance moves from "not acceptable" to "average" to

"outstanding"? (4) Are rewards or sanctions provided in accountability processes and if so, what are they? (5) Do states also require the same accountability efforts by private or parochial schools as they do for the public schools?

Most state efforts to improve public education are accomplished through the establishment of an accountability package that tends to pinpoint school success in educating young people. The response by school districts contacted about the assessment of local schools was that the concept is admirable; however, since most state accountability mechanisms are new and untested, school performance scores are a concern of local school principals and teachers. Most states are allocating additional funds for continued development of accountability measures and for professional development assistance during the first few years of program implementation. In addition, most states are evaluating all K-12 schools for effectiveness, regardless of school location or enrollment demographics. Many states are not interested in ranking one school against another, but in finding a general effectiveness score for which to aim as representative of a productive school. State formulas for determining school effectiveness scores normally consider a combination of variables including the following: (a) local criteria, (b) national tests, (c) student attendance, (d) dropout rate, (e) graduation rate, and (f) socio-economic backgrounds of the student body.

States utilize a variety of terms to describe schools that are effective in accordance with identified benchmarks. Labels include Demonstrated Exemplary, Accredited, Academically Distinguished, Summary Accredited, and Clear. Other labels used to describe schools in the lower performing category are In need of Improvement, Denied Accredited, Unaccredited, Alert 3, Unacceptable and Academically Unacceptable. The professional development component of most accountability programs occurs under the

direction and supervision of the local school district. Program funding for accountability is usually built into the state accountability package. Finally, private and parochial schools are not included in state mandates affecting school accountability.

Data collected from Louisiana public education policy makers indicate that the state's efforts to determine school performance is in the mainstream of national efforts. It appears that the Louisiana accountability plan is somewhat more aggressive in application since schools are ranked and compared against each other's score of performance. Finally, procedures for assistance for schools scoring low are consistent with national efforts.

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